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Freedom in the University

OUTLINE OF AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE
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By Charles William Dabney

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Freedom in the University



The University stands for three things: Democracy, Truth, and Freedom.

Every true university is organized on the democratic plan; it holds truth as its supreme ideal and maintains freedom as the first condition of learning. Dr. Gladden, than whom we have no greater prophet of Democracy, told us today what Democracy had already accomplished, and gave us a splendid vision of what it is still to do. Dr. Philipson, the President of our Phi Beta Kappa, has often spoken to us of the ideals of Truth. I wish to speak now of the third great principle of the university, Academic Freedom.

The freedom of learning, of research, and of teaching is the jealously-guarded palladium of the true university — jealously guarded because won through long centuries of strife. Universities have not always been free, and all universities are not free today. In the early days they were in bondage to the church, which held in its powerful grip the soul of humanity, and sought, by the mandate of authority, to direct the thoughts of men. The classical Renaissance gave the world again the liberating influence of the Greek ideals of the harmonious development of the whole man, of body, mind and soul, in the pursuit of learning and the expression of beauty. Yet this partial emancipation soon yielded to the new tyranny of a dead scholasticism. Only in the last century did the conquering spirit of universal liberty finally uplift the fair figure of academic freedom and enthrone her in the university, to be forever the guardian of the rights of men—to learn to teach, and to live the truth. For this reason we call this discipline “the liberal education.” It sets the human spirit free and trains it for service in life.

The university is thus first of all the enemy of all superstition, whether in church, school, or legislature. The disciplines of the college — languages, philosophy, history, mathematics, and the sciences — are all means to this one end, the making of the scholar, the seeker for and the liver of the truth. They are the tools with which, from that rude block of stone, the freshman, the college carves an image of ideal beauty, the roundly-developed graduate, such as we greet here tonight.

These college tools may, of course, be often changed, and let us hope they may never cease to be improved. Every school should be an experimental laboratory in education, in which to make and test new tools; but the end of the liberal education will ever be the free, powerful, truth-loving man, the trained thinker and the skilled worker for his race.

All this is true — absolutely true — but the academic freedom of which I speak is opposed to anarchy as much as to superstition. Liberty is not license. The highest freedom is possible only in pursuit of truth and in obedience to law. The locomotive is not free when, its engineer falling asleep or its brakes failing, it runs away down the mountain side, hurling scores of men and women to destruction. Nor is a man free when his passions overthrow his judgment, his will no longer controls his disordered brain, and his mind runs riot in folly. Such a man was not liberally educated. His training has failed to make him love the truth and obey the law as the liberal education should. “*Lehrfreiheit*,” academic freedom, is not license to live without law or to attack the foundations of society. The teacher of anarchy, whether economic, political, or social, has no place in the university.

All good things in this human world of ours are liable to distortion, and academic freedom may be abused also. We have our freaks and fools in the universities, as everywhere else. “Many foolish opinions are offered by German professors,” says Paulsen, “which have their origin partly in the mere mania for contradiction and originality. Every new docent takes a pride in having his own system, and in setting up something new, even though it be false and shallow, instead of ‘the old truth’ of which Goethe once spoke. A more or less arbitrary principle is chosen, new paradoxical notions are deduced from it, and a system constructed out of them. Then pupils are enlisted and drilled in the

new ideas; there is no absurdity for which, if it appears in the form of a system, a number of pupils can not soon be found in Germany, who proclaim it as the newest truth, and call it the greatest thing of the day." Mere speculations, be they merely philosophical dreaming or scientific scheming, do not make one free. Only "the truth shall make you free."

Teachers are, moreover, officers of society, employed and trusted to use these disciplines in the training of scholars and the discovery of truth. "How then can they be allowed to shake the foundations of the very institutions which it is their office and function to preserve?"

The university is free only when it organizes all the forces of society so they work effectively for the discovery of new knowledge, the teaching of the truth, the love of the beautiful and the development of morals. The teacher is free only when his best and fullest powers are devoted, without stint or halt, to the advancement and teaching of the science to which his life is dedicated. The student is free only when he strives faithfully to improve the opportunities provided for him, to the end that he may in time make some return to the society that bred and the institutions that nourished him.

Freedom is opposed to ignorance and superstition, but it is in perfect harmony with law and order. It aims rather for their completion, their fullest fruition. Ignorance and superstition, misgovernment and anarchy, always and everywhere produce the cruelest slavery. The multitudinous suns that, with their attendant company of planets, satellites, comets, and asteroids, fill the heavens on these brilliant nights, are free only as they obey the mandates of the law of gravitation. Every planet of them is free, but only to whirl in its appointed orbit, to fill its destined part in the mechanism of infinite space. Even those seeming wanderers, the comets, are under the control of the same great law. They appear to us to be erratic only because their orbits reach beyond our few years. A comet in our own little system is a contradiction. Your sham investigators and sensational teachers are like meteors, at best only stray atoms of dust in the process of burning up. They know not the truth, they obey not the law; therefore, they blaze a moment, flash out and are gone.

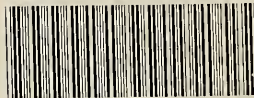
Slavery in all its forms, springs either from anarchy, the absence of law, or misgovernment, its abuse. Both are wicked. Let us forever remember that more is to be feared from anarchy than from tyranny; that the ideal of government is self-government; that the ideal of freedom is the eternal subjection of the human will to the authority of right. Said Goethe:

“To this thought I hold with strong persistence,
The last result of wisdom stamps it true:
He only earns his freedom and existence,
Who daily conquers self anew.”

So, in the moral universe, a man is free only when he lives in accordance with the laws of the universe, which are the laws of God. Only when in harmony with His law is he in the way of his highest welfare, the orbit of his ultimate destiny. The supreme law of the moral universe is the law of brotherhood, the duty of each, not only to do justice to, but to serve lovingly, his fellow men. The end of scholarship is, after all, not merely the discovery of truth, or even the teaching of the truth, but the use of all truth for the advancement of the race. The end of education is not merely the self-realization of the individual, or even the self-realization of the race or the nation, but the service of all mankind. The ideal of the true scholar is “That Service Which Alone is Perfect Freedom.”



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